# Autism diagnoses in the UK rise eightfold as awareness expands definition and recognition



Recent discussions around autism diagnosis rates in the UK have sparked significant interest, with many questioning whether the number of autistic individuals is on the rise. A study led by Ginny Russell, associate professor in psychiatry at University College London (UCL), reveals that the rate of new autism diagnoses has dramatically increased—eightfold—from 1998 to 2018. This exponential growth indicates that significantly more individuals are being diagnosed with autism today compared to two decades ago, a trend observed not only in the UK but also in other Anglophone and European countries.

Upon examining the criteria for autism, it is clear that a diagnosis necessitates "persistent difficulties in social life and in social communication," which can manifest in various behaviours, from limited conversational turn-taking to non-verbal communication. In addition, characteristics such as restricted interests and repetitive behaviours are critical components for diagnosis, according to Russell.

While the evidence points toward a noticeable rise in diagnoses, experts caution that this does not necessarily equate to an increase in the actual autistic population. Francesca Happé, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at King’s College London, highlights that the understanding of autism has evolved over the decades. Initially focused on children with high support needs, the definition expanded in the 1990s with the inclusion of Asperger’s syndrome and other diagnoses. Presently, the term "autism spectrum disorder" encompasses a broader array of traits and severities than previously recognised, contributing to the surge in diagnoses.

The rise is especially significant among women and girls, prompting professionals like Sarah Hendrickx, who has over 15 years of diagnosing experience, to note a shift in demographic patterns. Historically, autism diagnoses were predominantly male, but now there is a growing recognition of autism in females, who often display different traits or mask their symptoms more effectively. Hendrickx suggests that many girls received diagnoses for unrelated mental health conditions instead of autism due to this masking.

Moreover, there is a growing trend of adult diagnoses, with a staggering increase in individuals without intellectual disabilities receiving identification. Research shows a 700% rise in autism diagnoses in those without intellectual disabilities from 2000 to 2018, compared to a mere 20% increase among those with intellectual disabilities. This shift reflects a change in societal awareness and understanding of autism, according to professionals in the field.

For individuals like Ellie Middleton—a content creator, author, and autistic person—the rise in autism diagnoses is a positive development. Diagnosed only three years ago, Middleton attributes her sense of wellbeing and mental health improvement to the diagnosis, stating it allowed her to reshape her life. However, there are also concerns regarding public perceptions of autism, particularly stemming from media portrayals that may glamorise the condition. Venessa Swaby, who runs support groups for autistic children, raises fears that media focus might overshadow the experiences of non-speaking autistic individuals or those with significant support needs.

The increase in diagnoses correlates with an evolving understanding of neurodiversity, challenging traditional notions of what it means to be autistic. Yet, this shift in perspective has led to ongoing discussions about ownership and self-identification within the autism community, as more people become increasingly aware of their neurodivergent traits and seek recognition.

Overall, while substantial changes in diagnostic statistics suggest a heightened awareness and understanding of autism, they also highlight the complexities of classification and the ongoing evolution of societal perceptions regarding neurodiversity.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.theepochtimes.com/article/uk-autism-cases-rose-787-percent-from-1998-to-2018-study-4021503> - This article discusses the findings of the study, highlighting the eightfold increase in autism diagnoses in the UK between 1998 and 2018, and suggests that the rise is likely due to increased recognition rather than an actual increase in prevalence.
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6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autism> - This Wikipedia page provides an overview of autism, including information on diagnostic criteria and trends in diagnosis rates, corroborating the article's discussion on the rise in autism diagnoses and evolving understanding of the condition.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgp08z3egno> - Please view link - unable to able to access data